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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of a formal evaluation process upon educational change--specifically, the adoption of innovative reading programs and practices--at different organizational levels of implementation. Because of the size of the project (62 school systems, 142 designated schools, three sets of categorical funded projects), the evaluation design is very simple. SPUR's organization as perceived by participants, self-reports of teacher reading instruction practices, and general professional development and teacher inservice activities were measured through survey instruments. The evaluation describes SPUR in terms of the above data and correlates student reading gains with these data plus other indicators of the degree to which the school has followed SPUR-recommended standards and practices. The evaluation had three positive uses in the SPUR program to date: bookkeeping, self-definition, and program change. Acceptance of the evaluation process and use of it or its measures appears to depend upon the extent to which the person or group has participated in developing and conducting the evaluation. Outcomes suggest there are benefits to be gained from involving clients in evaluation activities to the fullest extent. (Author/GK)

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Evaluation and the Persistance of Innovation:

The Louisiana Special Plan Upgrading Reading (SPUR) Project

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of a formal evaluation process upon educational change -- specifically, the adoption of innovative reading programs and practices -- at different organizational levels of implementation. Unlike the other projects discussed here today, Louisiana's Special Plan Upgrading Reading, or SPUR, Project involves a State Department of Education initiative carried out in a stepwise fashion through each level of the "organization chart" of the state's educational system. The program is administered through the State Department to regional teams of professionals, and from them through the local school systems to ultimately reach individual schools and classroom teachers. This structure allows an examination of how change is brought about, and how the evaluation of change has an effect at each level of the educational system. This is the second year of SPUR's operation, and the first year the project is being evaluated. Therefore, this discussion is concerned with the effects of developing and establishing the evaluation process.

Description of the Project. SPUR is a statewide, and completely state-funded, project to improve reading among K-8 students through the development of local resources. It follows the philosophy and methods of the federal Right-to-Read program, providing regional teams of reading specialists who work as change agents with local school systems in developing central office staff and school principals as instructional leaders. These principals and central office staff commit themselves to developing a reading plan for each school system and to participating in inservice training which they are expected to carry back to the schools and classroom teachers. SPUR also funds three categories of competitive grant projects which feed into the educational delivery system. These are the university college of education projects, targeted toward improving preservice and graduate teacher education; education option projects

for students with special reading problems or needs; and parent/community involvement projects. Within the core organizational framework of SPUR there are two major kinds of activities: the system-wide or regional inservice and direct services provided by SPUR Technical Assistants (the change agents) to designated Demonstration or Practice Schools.

Both the philosophy and the organization of SPUR have some inherent tensions that affect the project's implementation and its reaction to the evaluation process. The change agent philosophy has some contradictions. For one thing, the Technical Assistants are both service-oriented reading specialists and change agents. It is often difficult to refrain from providing a needed service and to convince systems to develop this service for themselves. For another, this change agentry role is unfamiliar in many cases to SPUR staff and local education staff. Not knowing how to define SPUR's role is a problem that is discussed later in this paper.

The organization of SPUR is both bureaucratic and decentralized. There is an identifiable chain of communication from the State Department through the field-based regional SPUR Teams, which are comprised of a Team Leader and Technical Assistants who work directly with local systems and schools. However, each school system is independent and has a very limited contractual relationship with the state SPUR organization. The regional Teams come under stress because they are responsible to both the state SPUR staff and the local school systems. This organization affects the evaluation process in several ways. Participation in the evaluation process is completely voluntary at the local level, all data collection must be negotiated through each local school system, and SPUR staff are directly collecting virtually all of the needed information.

SPUR's Reaction to the Evaluation Process. As stated earlier, this is the first year in which there has been any attempt at a formal evaluation. Summative results of this year's activities will not be available until the summer. Because of the size of the project -- 62 school systems and 142 desig-

nated schools, plus three sets of categorical funded projects -- the evaluation design is very simple. The organization of SPUR as it is perceived by participants, self-reports of teacher reading instruction practices, and general professional development and teacher inservice activities are measured through survey instruments. A subset of schools is also conducting classroom observations for student engagement and teacher practices, and pre- and post-testing students with the CTB/McGraw-Hill Prescriptive Reading Inventory. The evaluation will describe SPUR in terms of the data listed above and will correlate student reading gains with some of these data plus other indicators of the degree to which the school has followed SPUR-recommended standards and practices. SPUR Directors and SPUR Teams are collecting all data.

SPUR had no evaluation in its initial year of operation. The project also had not developed systematic recordkeeping procedures. The evaluation of SPUR is not completely voluntary. The state SPUR staff were directed by the legislature to collect evidence of the project's impact upon elementary reading achievement with the strong implication that future funding would be dependent upon this. The State Department of Education SPUR staff and the local school systems are relatively unfamiliar with evaluation, their experience being by and large limited to the monitoring required by federally funded projects. This has meant that project staff tend to discount any information that cannot be expressed by numbers: they complain that, "It's all in my head, but I can't document it." Other experience has included the personnel evaluation system mandated by the Louisiana legislature in recent years, which has made it difficult for school system and school staff to recognize that the classroom observations will not be used to evaluate teachers or schools, and the state's equally new student assessment testing which has led SPUR Teams to feel that their schools must do "well" on the evaluation's reading test. The last is the most serious problem for the evaluation. If the misunderstanding forces teachers to drill students on test objectives it could alienate school faculty and mask any possible relationship

between SPUR-endorsed programs and practices and reading achievement.

State Department of Education SPUR staff entered the evaluation with some anxiety because they were unfamiliar with the evaluation process and because they do not expect SPUR to have any large immediate effect upon student reading. Some goals, such as improving university pre-service teacher education, are very long range indeed.

The field-based SPUR Teams reviewed the evaluation design before the school year began, but did not fully realize the amount of work it would entail until they actually began administering tests and training for classroom observations. SPUR Directors, Superintendents of Schools, principals and teachers have recognized that cooperation is voluntary but have participated because they viewed this as necessary for the continuation of a program they valued or through personal commitments to SPUR staff. In some cases they have found the information -- such as objectives mastery reports from the pre-testing -- useful. At this point local school staff generally view the evaluation process as an additional expenditure of teacher and student time with possible problems of confidentiality if school and teacher data should become public. Technical Assistants are faced with the dilemma of collecting complete information without jeopardizing their relationship with school staff. And, the concern for confidentiality will make it difficult to provide evaluation findings to system and school-level staff in a usable manner. Teachers can be given their own classroom data for comparison with the statewide report but the data cannot be reported at an aggregate higher than the classroom. Many systems have only one school participating in SPUR, therefore, system or regional reports would almost surely identify individuals or schools.

To sum up, the evaluation process is viewed in part as a threat. It has the potential to discredit SPUR despite the participants' "knowing" that they are having a positive effect. The evaluation requires staff time which the staff

sees as better spent in pursuing project goals, and the evaluation raises problems of confidentiality that could threaten the project's legitimacy. Some developing reactions are more positive.

Uses of the Evaluation Process. The evaluation has had three positive uses in the SPUR program to date: bookkeeping, self-definition and program change. This last has been viewed favorably by the State Department of Education SPUR staff but raises obvious problems for the evaluation.

The bookkeeping activities ranged from providing SPUR with very basic headcount information to providing assistance in the project's overall organization of information. As a very simple example, the project had an extensive directory of schools participating in SPUR but had never tallied the number of schools, teachers or students this directory represented. The staff knew that there were variations from system to system in the manner in which services were delivered (practice schools versus different types of systemwide impact) but had not arranged these into a taxonomy. A second bookkeeping function was the awareness that there was some value in keeping records of project activities. State SPUR staff organized the previous year's files and are now able to locate what information was retained. Finally, having organized information has been of some use at the regional and school levels of SPUR. This is probably best exemplified in the use of the reading achievement test. After discussion with project staff, a test was selected which provides criterion-referenced information about student reading for teacher use and norm-referenced scores for evaluation purposes. The test publisher also provided a correlation of the test's objectives with the Louisiana Minimum Standards / Maximum Goals for Reading and correlations between the test objectives and commonly used basal series. SPUR Technical Assistants and the teachers with whom they work used this information to come up with rough diagnoses of student performance (none of the matches were perfect) in terms of requirements for the Louisiana State Assessment test and the basal series which were their resources for meeting these requirements.

This was not a new attempt, but it was a benefit to systems which had not had such correlations in the past and it allowed SPUR staff in different school systems to share efforts. This had been impossible in the past since systems use different standardized testing, testing schedules, and basals.

A second use of evaluation processes was self-definition. This is not uncommon in evaluations, but should be considered here a major benefit albeit an unplanned one. Considering the project's unfamiliarity with evaluation, this was the step that legitimized the SPUR evaluation with the staff. There was some clarification of goals in simply interviewing staff about the past year's activities and asking them how decisions had beer made. Self-definition appeared more clearly when the State Department of Education staff participated in developing the survey instruments to measure teacher practices in reading and the organizational structure and functions of the project. The teacher practices instrument was developed by asking SPUR to develop a description of what the ideal reading teacher would do. This model was worked into a survey format with a great deal of discussion among the project staff. The discussion, in turn, forced the staff to organize the different individual practices they had been promoting; in the past these had been treated as separate elements without the whole they comprised being expressed as a total system. The staff also saw similarities between different approaches being used in the eight regions and how these could be subsumed under a model for reading instruction. This outcome could be particularly useful if it is presented as an overall system for organizing the content of SPUR.

The development of the survey measuring the assignment of responsibilities in SPUR and the perception of who actually carries them out provided self-definition from a management rather than a programmatic perspective. The functions in operating SPUR -- management, inservice, development, etc. -- were derived from the project's handbook. Review of responses to this instrument showed some confusion and disagreement on the part of the SPUR staff about who

was actually to be assigned specific functions, which functions were to be delegated, and to whom. It also brought out, after discussion, the way in which the responsibilities for functions could shift from the beginning of a system's involvement in SPUR to its maturity as a system which had completely adopted the project. Again, there is no evidence to suggest how the final product of this survey will be used. It could be ignored, used to encourage recalcitrant systems to toe the line, or viewed as a model for different management structures.

The processes of developing evaluation instruments and training project staff to administer them have also brought about some programmatic changes. This occurred somewhat in the standardized testing already noted. Placing students in the test brought about school- or grade-wide informal reading inventory usage in some cases and also reinforced correlation of the basal series with the state's Minimum Standards. These were more changes in emphasis than changes in kinds of activity. The latter appeared most clearly in the classroom observations for student engagement rates.

Student engagement, or time-on-task, measures were initially requested as part of the evaluation by the SPUR staff. There was a general feeling that this would be a good predictor of student reading gain and that classroom management systems being promoted in several regions could be basically measured by looking at student engagement. This, more than any other activity, was developed with the participation of the field-based Team Leaders and required fairly intensive training and effort on their part and the part of the Technical Assistants. The observation system chosen also required the participation of the teachers observed, who recorded part of the observational information. Initially, there was a great deal of anxiety and resistance. Eventually, the Technical Assistants and many of the teachers liked it. The Technical Assistants reported that the observations allowed them to see patterns in teaching and classroom management of which they had previously been unaware and forced them

to concentrate on student behaviors rather than observing the teacher alone. Teachers in many cases appreciated being included in the diagnostic process and found the resulting information useful. Use of the classroom observation system plus the attention that student engagement has received recently in professional literature have added time-on-task to the content of SPUR. What was intended as an evaluation measure may be used as a program component next year.

Summary. There are several conclusions to be drawn from the manner in which the SPUR project has used its evaluation. The first is that this use began before any data were collected or information provided. The final evaluation report will have to admit a very strong Heisenberg effect: the act of measurement itself changed the phenomenon being observed. The second is that there is no evidence at this point of evaluation having a chilling effect upon the adoption of the SPUR project. This may occur if the evaluation findings have no effect upon the project's continuation or direction. It may also occur if too much energy is placed into "teaching to the evaluation" rather than pursuing the project's avowed goals. The very problems of gaining voluntary participation in the evaluation and using project participants as data collectors may have prevented a chilling effect. The final conclusion is that acceptance of the evaluation process and use of the process or its measures appears to depend upon the extent to which the person or group has participated in developing and conducting the evaluation. Information appears to be used by the people who collect it. Although the processes and products of evaluation may have very different effects, the outcomes discussed in this paper suggest that there are many benefits to be gained from involving clients in evaluation activities to the fullest extent possible.

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